

# Out&About

MORE GREAT TRAVEL IDEAS IN THE MIDWEST

## BUY AND TELL

In the 1800s, the Illinois and Michigan Canal fueled a trail of commerce from the Illinois River to Chicago. Today, girlfriends can follow the canal for a history-infused, shopping-filled getaway.

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**A TOUCH OF HISTORY**  
A statue in Ottawa, Illinois', Washington Square Park recalls the famed 1858 senate campaign debates of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas.

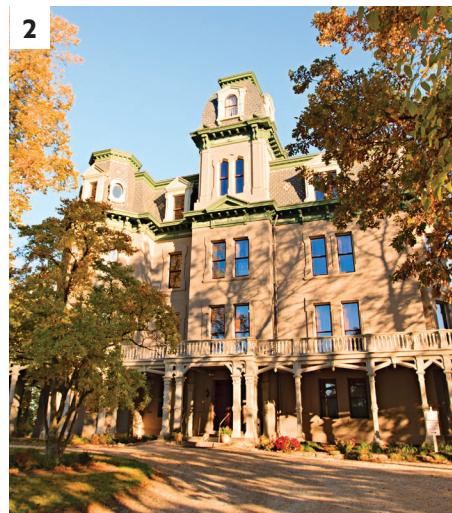
**U**SUALLY, I MEET SHARON on a weeknight, spending my few hours of purchased freedom catching up over cosmopolitans in a suburban Chicago eatery and watching the clock, fearful of keeping the babysitter out past curfew. But today, there's no rush. We're sipping sweet-tart strawberry lemonade made at shabby-chic Letty Mae's Tearoom (tea optional) in Morris, Illinois, 70 miles southwest of Chicago and one of the cities that prospered during the Illinois and Michigan Canal's late-1800s heyday.

It's the kickoff of our tour of five small towns dotting the path of the former canal, a major transportation route connecting a tributary of the Mississippi River to Lake Michigan. The canal opened central Illinois and Chicago to Southern goods like oranges and sugar and brought life to the communities dotting this picturesque region. Today, though the canal itself is closed, the cities along its route remain lively, with boutique-filled downtowns and pretty canalside parks. A biking path along the canal's banks allows hikers and cyclists to follow its 90-some-mile route, but Sharon and I were intrigued by the idea of a quintessential girlfriend road trip, stopping by artsy attractions and browsing through the modern boutiques.

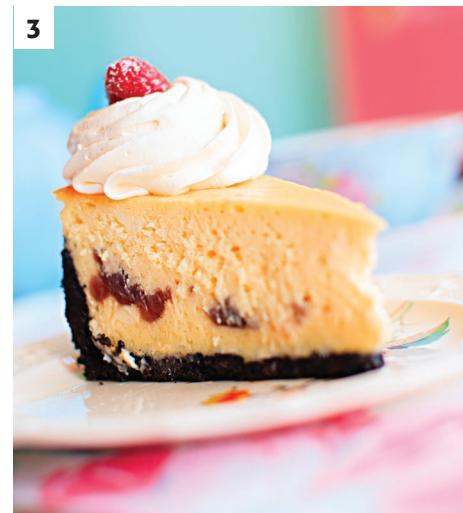
At Letty Mae's, after our soup bowls and salad plates are cleared, we trace a 60-mile driving route from Morris to Princeton on a map and discuss our stops. There are wine tastings in Utica, horseback riding in LaSalle, a theater festival in Princeton and shopping, lots of shopping, in between. Carrying a box of peach scones from the bakery counter (after all, what's a road trip without snacks?), we set off.



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## MUST-SEE SHOPS

**1** Funky shops and bright murals draw travelers to Princeton's downtown district. **2** LaSalle's 1874 Hegeler Carus Mansion is open for public tours. **3** Nosh decadent cheesecake at Letty Mae's Tearoom in Morris. **4** Annie's Little Pots in Princeton stocks art made by local potters. **5** Outside Morris, Redbud Creek Farm thrills people with green thumbs.



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# The fab five

Five fabulous towns turn a 60-mile drive along the Illinois and Michigan Canal into a weekend getaway. Here are our favorite stops in each town, as traveled from east (Morris) to west (Princeton). For more information, Canal Corridor Association (815/223-1851; iandmcanal.org; girlsroadtrip.com).

**MORRIS** The second Saturday of each month welcomes **Three French Hens**, an outdoor flea market with a focus on the French country aesthetic. Vendors selling shabby-chic antiques, hand-milled soaps, artisanal cheeses, fresh-baked breads and cut flowers set up booths in Canal Port Park (along the path of the former canal, of course). Two market dates remain this year: September 13 and October 11 ([threefrenchhensmarket.blogspot.com](http://threefrenchhensmarket.blogspot.com)).

## MORE GREAT STOPS

**Gigi's** stocks a carefully curated collection of modern clothing (815/513-5788). **Sweet Tooth** peddles more than 60 Jelly Belly bean flavors, fresh caramel corn, fudge, ice cream and a make-your-own version of the classic, kid-favorite candy Pixy Stix (815/942-1003). Antiques, scented candles and handmade note cards join **Ruby Begonia's** updated take on Victorian-style fashions (815/941-0752). Quilters can browse thousands of bolts of colorful quilting cotton, plus patterns, books and notions at **The Fabric Center** (815/942-5715; [fabriccenteril.com](http://fabriccenteril.com)).

Cold strawberry soup, fresh salads and decadent pastries make **Letty Mae's Tearoom** (815/416-1370; [lettymaes.com](http://lettymaes.com)) a good lunch option; the blue walls and floral tablecloths feels more girlie-fresh than grandmother. For an on-the-road pick-me-up, hit **Brewed Awakenings'** (815/513-5567; [brewedawakenings.com](http://brewedawakenings.com)) drive-through for java creations that last the 22-mile drive to stylish rural garden center **Redbud Creek Farm**. Browse annuals and perennials, ceramic pots and sculptures set in seasonal garden vignettes (815/496-9400; [redbudcreekfarm.com](http://redbudcreekfarm.com)).



**OTTAWA** A mural across the street from downtown's **Washington Square Park** depicts the park's claim to fame as the site of the first 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debate. Stop to enjoy the park's reflecting pool before a stroll through the nearby neighborhood reveals Civil War-Era homes and churches.

#### MORE GREAT STOPS

A vintage jukebox plays oldies in a former cheese factory, where **The Cheese Shop 'n' Deli** serves some 33 kinds of sandwiches (try the pot roast sub) as well as soups and salads (815/433-0478; [thecheeseshop.biz](http://thecheeseshop.biz)). **Murals** around town depict important chapters in

Ottawa's history, including the Native American tribes that hunted here and the industry of the canal era. Locals love to gather on **Tracy's Row House's** outdoor patio for dinner and cocktails—it serves more than 100 martinis (815/434-3171; [tracysrowhouse.com](http://tracysrowhouse.com)).

**UTICA** Cabins sport modern kitchens, cozy fireplaces and covered front porches at **Kishauwau Country Cabins**, in the forest outside Utica.

Anyone can visit the community cabin, which conjures memories of sleep-away camp with a canteen (payments made on the honor system) and a library of books and board games. But sipping wine before a private fire pit under the stars feels decidedly adult (815/442-8453; [kishauwaucabins.com](http://kishauwaucabins.com)).

#### MORE GREAT STOPS

Visitors can wander through a barn, a blacksmith shop and a schoolhouse before touring the **LaSalle County Historical Society Museum**,

which traces the area's settlement and canal development (815/667-4861; [lasallecountymuseum.org](http://lasallecountymuseum.org)). Sample several vintages at the **Illinois River Winery**, which specializes in fruit wines (cranberry-white is our pick) (815/667-4012; [illinoisriverwinery.com](http://illinoisriverwinery.com)). Or sip flavor-infused wines on the vineyard patio of **August Hill Winery** (and sample the bubbly from sister company

**Illinois Sparkling Company**). Six half-ounce tastings run \$5 (815/667-5211; [augusthillwinery.com](http://augusthillwinery.com) or [illinoissparklingco.com](http://illinoissparklingco.com)).

**Flutterby Gourmet Popcorn** comes in more than three dozen flavors, including blue raspberry, caramel-pecan and cheesy bacon (866/898-2676; [flutterbypopcorn.com](http://flutterbypopcorn.com)). Roadhouse restaurant **Cajun Connection** dishes authentic Louisiana bayou eats and craft beers. Whether you order fried gator tail or the more tame étouffée, jambalaya or gumbo, always opt for the decadent homemade pecan pie (815/667-9855; [ronscajunconnection.com](http://ronscajunconnection.com)).





**LASALLE** The seat of LaSalle County is home to a trove of **Illinois and Michigan Canal** history. Guides in 1800s costume narrate boat rides up and down the canal. (A pair of mules named Moe and Larry pull the boats, just as their ancestors may have done.) Pick up tickets and check out the canal-theme mural at the Lock 16 Visitor Center.

#### MORE GREAT STOPS

Guides at **Cedar Creek Ranch** lead one-hour horseback rides past a Civil War-Era cemetery and 1800s coal mine (815/481-3337; [crcrstable.com](http://crcrstable.com)). The spacious ranch's **Gun Smoke Grill** serves hearty sandwiches, and bands perform on the rustic corral stage on weekends ([thegunsmokegrill.com](http://thegunsmokegrill.com)).

The self-guided **I&M Canal Silhouettes Tour** showcases canal-era movers and shakers. (Wild Bill Hickok was a mule handler.) More than a dozen silhouettes can be found near **Lock 14**, on the 62-mile canalside biking path **I&M Canal State Trail**.

The National Historic Landmark 1874 **Hegeler Carus Mansion** showcases lavish rooms with (mostly) original furnishings, intricate parquet floors, hand-painted ceilings and a gymnasium with original equipment (815/224-6543; [hegelercarus.org](http://hegelercarus.org)).

## PRINCETON

Professional thespians and theater fans flock to Princeton beginning in June for the annual **Festival 56**, the multiseason theater celebration that stages classical productions (think Shakespeare) and modern plays and musicals. The fall season kicks off in early November with Nora Ephron's *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* (815/879-5656; [festival56.com](http://festival56.com)).

#### MORE GREAT STOPS

Artsy boutiques under striped awnings fill the 1800s storefronts along **Main Street**. **Annie's Little Pots** carries the owner's pottery, plus paintings, photography and jewelry created by nearly two dozen central Illinois artisans; Annie works in an on-site pottery studio (815/875-2372; [annieslittlepots.com](http://annieslittlepots.com)). Seamstresses stitch adorable tutus, hair bows and kids' clothes in the sewing room of **Amma's Studio** (815/915-8075; [ammasstudio.com](http://ammasstudio.com)). Sipping a glass of wine while browsing at **Beetz Me** (815/879-7777; [beetzme.com](http://beetzme.com)) easily turns into a buying spree of artsy clothing, gourmet foods and French perfume. On South Main, **Bead Buzz Jewelry Designs** (815/879-3000) sells affordable silver, Swarovski crystal and semiprecious stone bling. We love the versatile, extra-long necklaces that can be worn as-is or looped twice for a different look. **Good Scents** (815/872-3687; [goodscentslimited.com](http://goodscentslimited.com)) perfumery mixes perfumes, colognes, aromatherapy oils and lotions with scents like carnation, sandalwood or cinnamon. **MWL**